

BUILDING NETWORK CAPACITY AMONG MEMORY INSTITUTIONS

A Multi-strand Development Approach

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Abstract – The National Archives of the United Kingdom has a leadership role for archives in England, representing a very broad range of memory institutions, most with limited digital capacity. This paper outlines the multi-strand approach underway to build capacity across this network of archives. The paper focuses on the aims of different intervention approaches and the involvement of the archives community and its stakeholders in different elements of delivery. The paper finishes with preliminary analysis of impact and known risks of this approach.

Keywords – networking, capacity-building, national archives, archives, memory institutions

Conference Topics – Building Capacity, Capability and Community; Collaboration: a Necessity, an Opportunity or a Luxury?

I. INTRODUCTION

The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA) has long undertaken collaborative activity with the wider UK archives sector, but in 2011 it received a specific leadership mandate from government to develop the archive sector, within the nation of England [1]. This leadership role has required a strategic approach to addressing key challenges which inhibit the development of archives in a modern context.

The current sector vision *Archives Unlocked* identifies sector digital capacity as one of three key development themes, to support both preservation and discoverability of archive holdings [2]. Previous strategic activity, notably *Archives for the 21st Century*, had similarly identified the challenge of digital capacity, but had set TNA's role as primarily to create guidance and tools for the archive sector to use [3]. *Archives Unlocked* marks a shift to a more interventive strategy.

A. *The archives sector in England*

The scale and complex nature of the archives sector across which this leadership role is delivered greatly increases the challenge of delivering change. Depending on definitions, the scope of the leadership role covers several hundred to several thousand archive services [4]. This has influenced the range of approaches currently employed.

1) *Types of archive service:* Archive services across England are highly heterogeneous. While there is a well-defined network of national and provincial public archives, major archive-holding operations exist among museums, charities, businesses, higher-education institutions, libraries, arts organisations, schools and community-developed archives. Audio-visual archives often exist as separate institutions. Some actively acquire archive collections by transfer or gift from external creators, while others function to deliver long-term preservation for institutional records remaining within the parent body. The statutory basis for their archive collecting varies from a closely-controlled set of legal obligations for some national record types to a permissive absence of mandate in law [5].

Outside national archive operations, there are few large archive services. Size of staff varies typically from fewer than ten professionals to a service operated by one or two full-time-equivalent posts. Although individual archive services have been addressing the digital transition, this general lack of scale and resources makes fundamental changes such as the shift towards digital particularly challenging. In many services, an individual professional will be expected to master skills across public engagement, analogue preservation, technical cataloguing requirements, depositor liaison, fundraising, and now curation of digital records. It is a formidable challenge. There are unquestionably capacity pressures which have made it

possible to postpone tackling digital transformation amidst other, equally urgent, pressures.

2) *Types of collections:* Whereas the legal basis and scale of archive services varies considerably, the nature of archive collections held is consistent across the vast majority of archive services in England. These are hybrid collections, representing a legacy of records in analogue format, often still actively accruing, and a collecting mandate which includes records in digital format. Acquisition of digital records is inconsistent, but there are few archives whose collecting mandate excludes post-20th century records, so a transition to digital acquisition and preservation is widely required.

B. *The leadership role of The National Archives*

1. *Boundaries and possibilities:* TNA's leadership role for the archive sector is only one of its areas of delivery [6]. As the archive for the UK government, management of and access to government digital records is core to the organisation's future. An institutional digital strategy sets its goal to "create the disruptive digital archive" [7]. TNA is also in itself a part of government, and a research institution, in which key archive topics can be explored and interrogated. This provides a vital background for work with the wider archives sector, and scope for innovative practice.

However, it is recognized that solutions suitable to a major national institution are not necessarily scalable. The cutting edge of research may not be what is required for a small archive with very limited resources and low risk appetite, seeking incremental progress. Balancing these roles of TNA is a vital part of fulfilling its work in different areas.

There are further complicating factors. TNA's leadership role is not supported by statutory powers over most classes of archive holdings. Only records which fall into limited categories (public, manorial, tithes, Diocesan) are legally controlled, and TNA's role with each is different. There is no blanket mandate for collecting archives across the nation.

TNA also does not have a statutory governance role over other archive services, nor is it funded to deliver archive services beyond its own collections. Change can only be achieved through partnership and consent. With the scale of the sector and the variety of mandates which support archive services' existence, one single solution to collecting and preserving all digital archives across England is impractically large and complex.

The role of developing archives sector capacity is also shared with other key strategic bodies. The Digital Preservation Coalition, from its UK beginnings, remains a key contributor to development and capacity building. The professional body, Archives and Records Association (UK and Ireland) has a more archives-specific role, and undertakes a range of training and guidance, including through the specialist Section for

Archives and Technology. JISC seeks to provide digital solutions in a research context, and provides training and guidance across digital activities. TNA also works closely with sector bodies supporting archives in the three other home nations of the UK. This can make for robust and effective partnerships. It also inevitably adds complexity. TNA is not acting alone in this field, needing to ensure effective partnerships and coordinated effort for most impact. There is however both a government mandate and a regularly-articulated archives sector expectation that TNA will have a strong offer in the area of digital preservation, given its prominence as a challenge across the sector.

2. *Audiences for digital leadership:* Development of digital skills throughout the sector requires focused attention on the practitioners who will be working actively with digital systems and collections and those in more senior leadership or strategic roles in which an overview of digital capabilities is crucial but detailed knowledge of tools or approaches is not. Crudely, leaders must know enough to lead. They must be able to evaluate different digital projects, proposals, contractors, tenders and approaches on their merits. If they cannot do this, they cannot adequately direct digital policy within their organisation and risk commissioning poor quality digital offerings and offering weak support to their staff.

But crucially, both archives practitioners and leaders are likely to be working in an environment in which their digital activity is constrained by an organisational IT culture. (If they are not embedded in a wider organisation they are likely to be highly resource constrained). This is not of itself a problem. Digital humanities activity is by its nature collaborative. Archivists can collaborate with IT peers to achieve delivery of complex digital projects Both can learn to speak the other's language [8]. However where there is no history of successful collaboration with IT within the organisation, this may seem a daunting prospect.

Anxiety over the effort and skills gap required to initiate such collaboration is a key driver of resistance to engagement with digital within some archives. Archivists are used to mastery of their subject. Stepping into a new arena where they must simultaneously argue a strong case while feeling uncertain of their knowledge provokes aversive behaviours such as blaming slow procurement processes for a lack of progress, as if digital work could only be accomplished with a single large or expensive system [9].

II. SECTOR DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT: A MULTI-STRAND APPROACH

This combination of a hybrid-holding archives sector with limited individual capacity, and a weak statutory or funding basis for centralized delivery solutions has guided TNA's thinking and development of a mixed

economy of sector digital activity. This is a developing area, and subject to ongoing iterative review.

However, it has become critical to move forward from a passive, guidance-based, approach in previous strategic plans, to a more interventive role in building the sector's strength. Unfamiliar software and high-level technical language in support documentation can make this domain forbidding to archivists with humanities backgrounds. The best documentation, such as the DPC's Digital Preservation Handbook, does a good job of demystifying the discipline and yet has not transformed the confidence and position of the sector. After 15 years of concerted efforts at building excellent guidance and support, barely one third of those working in archives in England describe themselves as confident across a range of digital skills [10]. Stronger drivers are needed, and TNA can contribute at this level.

A. Strategic capacity building

In support of *Archives Unlocked*, a sector workforce strategy was published in 2018. Its first strategic objective: to "empower the archives workforce to adapt to major drivers of change, including digital technologies" [11].

Archives have excelled at certain aspects of digital work, including digitisation and the monetisation of digital assets. But compared to the museum and library sectors they are comparatively poor at a range of digital activities, particularly access and engagement. There has been great success at raising the profile of digital preservation work within archives but this has created a perception that digital archives work is solely preservation work. Over-emphasis on digital preservation at the cost of other digital skills is unfortunate because more generic skills are essential precursors to undertaking digital preservation work.

This has also encouraged some institutions to solve a digital capacity gap through preservation software procurement. Unfortunately, purchasing software does not automatically ensure a commensurate increase in an organisation's digital capacity and may indeed weaken the sector, through wasteful cost and a lack of redundant storage, as too many organisations contract with the same provider. In the more mature area of digital cataloguing, we are already seeing unfortunate effects of 'vendor lock in' to outdated legacy systems, in violation of open standards principles [12]. This has also militated against an approach which includes approval of particular software products, and towards an emphasis on understanding individual organizational context and solutions which fit collection needs, budget and technical competencies.

Training and guidance remain an essential part of TNA's activity to address these issues, but the method of approach has changed. Current areas of work include strongly emphasising that digital work is an integral part of archival activity and not an adjunct to it; supporting

senior leaders to understand what opportunities digital affords their services; supporting digital skills by developing a package of training and resources to support digital preservation and other digital activities; lobbying for an increased focus on digital content on accredited UK archives courses; and continuing to support open standards and open software. Digital capacity must be built with equal focus on preservation, access and engagement; at an appropriate skill level for the archival workforce of today and deliver clear social benefit to citizens. Increasing the sector's digital capability should be done in such a way as to positively impact the digital literacy of wider society.

B. Supporting networking and collaboration

Archival networks have been invaluable drivers of digital preservation work. The formation of regional consortia, often backed by grants from TNA, to explore issues of mutual concern has led several to develop joint work on digital preservation [13]. Often archives who are ahead in capacity use this as an opportunity to share knowledge and expertise with partners.

In 2018, a digital learning set using action learning techniques recruited 13 members from consortia and services already undertaking digital activity. This provided focused opportunities for knowledge exchange and skills development. In 2019, the set is being widened to form a new Digital Archives Learning Exchange (DALE) for archivists undertaking digital work, with discussion online and at periodic meetings hosted by regional archives. This will be a sector-led to address areas of emerging need. There is a specific aim to keep DALE membership to those who are actively undertaking digital development, moving beyond the model of informational training which is not then implemented in the workplace.

C. Offering new workforce opportunities

If a lack of digital skills and capacity is one of the crucial hindrances for progressing digital archives activity, a possible solution is the creation of new opportunities to draw in people to the archives workforce through different employment routes, broadening the range of individuals who work in archives. TNA has, with the support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund, run a series of traineeship programmes designed to address skills gaps in the archives sector. The most recent of these, Bridging the Digital Gap, specifically aims to bring in technical trainees who already have IT skills and aptitudes, and a background in Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. They then receive work-based training in archive principles and implementation of digital acquisition, preservation and access [14]. Among the outputs of the programme is intended to be a job description for a digital archives assistant, to inform recruitment across the sector. This model was built

through consultative sector workshops, to ensure a good fit between role and real job requirements.

This approach is further informed by the DigCurV framework, and particularly its Practitioner Lens, which underlines the need for technical skills at operational level, while oversight of policy and strategy may sit with broader roles, in this case with archivists and strategic managers [15]. This is a significant change from the current staffing pattern in archive services, where specialist skills sit primarily with archive professionals. Early response from host archives shows that this has been a valuable innovation.

D. Updating national archive standards

Archive Service Accreditation is a management standard for archives across the UK, originally co-created and published 2012-13. It is supported by a partnership of seven strategic archives bodies, including TNA. The standard is designed to apply to archive services of many types and sizes, following a scalable assessment approach. Reference was made throughout the 2013 Accreditation Standard to “analogue and digital records”, aiming to mainstream the management of digital records within collecting practice [16].

However, it was clear from the outset that further specific questions on management of digital archives would be required as the archive sector began actively to collect in this area. One benefit of Accreditation should be its role as a lever to improve performance. Leaving questions about digital preservation too open and generic risked weakening this impact. But given the sector’s limited capacity, an excessively demanding standard for digital preservation risked limiting the standard to larger, better funded organisations, contrary to its fundamental purpose.

From 2015 a working group of Accreditation representatives collaborated with the Digital Preservation Coalition to address this challenge. After mapping against existing digital preservation standards, it was agreed that no single existing standard should be incorporated as part of Archive Service Accreditation. The group proposed using the NDSA *Levels of Preservation* (v1) as a means of exploring risks to the preservation of digital materials [17]. Further updates to the programme covered topics such as funding, staff capacity, ability to collect material in different formats, and access to born-digital records.

These proposals were agreed by the Archive Service Accreditation Committee and became a live element of assessment from July 2018. The Committee notes that full compliance is not immediately expected, given that this is a developing area, but an awareness of risk and evidence of service planning towards implementing preservation is essential for applicants to succeed [18].

E. Evolving policy approaches

TNA’s role as sector leader requires consideration of the intersection between policy and delivery, particularly at points of known change.

1) *The future of Places of Deposit for Public Records:* Among TNA’s core legal responsibilities is oversight of a network of Places of Deposit appointed to hold public records [19]. This network allows records of primarily local interest – such as records of health authorities and magistrates’ courts – to remain within their communities. However, the transition to digital means some of these records are now generated and maintained centrally. As patterns of record-holding change, so it is time to consider what a future model for holding these records should be. Exploring options here seeks solutions which safeguard the public record and support the sector’s capacity to hold all digital records.

2) *The impact of digital transition on mechanisms for protection of cultural property:* The UK government has a number of mechanisms for protection of cultural property, including archives, such as export controls and tax incentives to donate to public collections. Charitable funders also support acquisition of cultural heritage, including archives. A public market in digital archives is yet to emerge, so that the current mechanisms do not yet have the reassurance of comparator prices to ensure that digital acquisitions can be supported in the way analogue archives have been.

This is an area where colleagues in TNA are undertaking research on the impact of digital archives on these mechanisms in general and specifically on export policy [20]. A range of reviews currently taking place across bodies concerned with archives as cultural property will also be relevant, as will a series of Digital Preservation Coalition events related to digital and value. Initial research suggests there is an appetite for the acquisition of digital archives and that the emergence of a market may be imminent, though its drivers are not yet clear. If the current mechanisms are to continue to work, it is essential to create a healthy digitally-capable archive sector prepared to accept and manage these culturally-valued digital collections. It seems possible that the range of services benefitting from the acquisition of significant archives through these mechanisms, already a relatively narrow group, will narrow further according to digital capacity.

III. PRELIMINARY IMPACTS AND OBSERVATIONS

These strands of activity have been developing in the first years of *Archives Unlocked*, and cannot be regarded as fully mature. However, we offer preliminary observations for the benefit of others interested in collaborative improvement programmes.

A. Positives of the approach

If this work was not being undertaken, TNA would be failing in its leadership role. Many individual archive services in England have made significant progress

towards digital activity through their own efforts. However, were TNA to continue to rely on publishing guidance online and offering generic training, rather than proactive interventions, there is a risk that other services would continue to avoid issue or struggle to secure institutional support to meet this challenge. Gaps in provision would continue to widen. A collaborative, national and networked approach brings services together and allows good practice to be highlighted, supported and shared.

TNA's position within government and with strong links across the archives sector provides a real opportunity to support policy development grounded in evidence of the variety of sector capacity. TNA's comparably dual role within digital institutions and cultural heritage can also be a support. There is some evidence that cultural heritage networks and digital preservation networks are talking among themselves about analogous issues of digital archives and value but are not yet talking to each other. TNA can have a useful role in bringing these networks together.

The flexibility and multiple entry points provided by a faceted approach to sector development mean that individual archive services are able to participate at a level that works for them. Tackling a range of issues offers something to any archive service around this critical area for their future. TNA can play a lead role in some aspects of development, but also act as a valued supporter in other strands of sector development work, incorporating opportunities to pursue its strategic aims.

The visibility of changes to Archive Service Accreditation to include more specific digital preservation content has been a vital part for all partners of moving the conversation across the entire archives sector. Archive services who choose to participate in Accreditation have for the first time assessed risks to the management, acquisition and accessibility of their digital collections alongside more familiar analogue risks. The standard's coverage of all types and sizes of UK archives has made it more difficult for reluctant services to avoid addressing the issue of digital preservation as a core element of their mission.

B. Known risks and weaknesses

The flexibility of the TNA approach has an unavoidable downside: it is more complex than a single, simple programme. As it forms part of multiple aspects of our work, within *Archives Unlocked* and partnership activities, it is harder to communicate than a one-track programme would be. There is a risk of appearing not to be taking action on this critical area, rather than having embedded it across business activities.

The dual nature of TNA's government/sector role also creates points of weakness and risk. As a government body we are not able to advise specifically on individual commercial products, when archives are urgently seeking systems solutions. At a policy level, the

statutory duty to protect the public record has to be our priority when looking at the future of devolved management of public records. A solution which empowers the sector's digital capacity-building is desirable, but cannot be the only consideration.

Collaborative and networking activity has weaknesses too. Where no strong leading organisation exists, archives have plainly learned together, but some consortia have moved at the pace of their slowest members and others have fallen victim to the same procurement trap as individual organisations – delaying significant preservation activity until some key partner or vendor can be persuaded to come on board.

Current activity has also focused on developing archive service capacity. It does not address support for researchers to access digital records, thus compounding an issue we have already noted is commonly seen in individual archives. In future, TNA will need to build support across a record's life, from creation to use.

C. Conclusion

Addressing the digital challenge is fundamental to the future health of archives in England, as across the globe. TNA has increasingly focused its strategic sector development in this area, and has moved from enabling and supporting through published guidance, to a more interventive, complex approach. Archives may opt to engage in networks, understand their risks through participation in standards schemes, employ digitally-expert staff or benefit from policy developments which recognize the transformational nature of digital change. While the diffuse nature of TNA's connections with the archives sector creates unavoidable areas of weakness and tension, it also avoids the risks of a monolithic approach which prioritises one single development area, neglecting other opportunities.

Above all, a connected but flexible approach makes change possible. The next challenge will be to move the conversation from regarding digital as a new task towards digital as business as usual. For the archives sector in England to fulfil its mission, we must find ways to move from regarding digital records as a new liability or threat, to recognizing their potential and value as a research resource for the future.

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